

Mr. DURBIN. The problem of torture among refugees is significant, with an estimated 44 percent of refugees in the United States having been victims of such horrors. Those from Bosnia, Cambodia, and many other places all receive free treatment at the Kovler Center to recover from their trauma.

During my visit I had the privilege of meeting refugees who had fled the mounting violence in Cameroon. Cameroon is a West African nation that is dealing with a complicated colonial legacy. Following World War I, the League of Nations appointed France and Great Britain as joint trustees to what was previously a German colony. Not surprisingly, the two colonial powers imposed their own cultures on the new Cameroon.

Tragically, following the country's independence in the 1960s, Cameroonian strongman President Paul Biya, one of the world's longest serving leaders—now almost 40 years in office—further favored the French-speaking population over its Anglophone regions.

The results were not surprising. The mounting resentment and calls for greater autonomy within the Anglophone population caused ensuing violent suppression from the Biya regime. The refugees I met with told harrowing stories of this crackdown and violence.

I was pleased to join Senator VAN HOLLEN last year in a letter urging Secretary Pompeo to focus attention on the unrest in Cameroon, and I was equally pleased when the administration scaled back U.S. military assistance to Cameroon due to this government's violent repression. As a Member of the Appropriations Committee, I will be watching carefully the level of violence in Cameroon and, when the day comes, when we consider any foreign aid to this Nation.

The work of the Kovler Center is a reminder that if we are going to stand up for human rights we must be willing to be vigilant at all times, even for small countries as far away as Cameroon.

I yield the floor.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read the nomination of Sean Cairncross, of Minnesota, to be Chief Executive Officer, Millennium Challenge Corporation.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Ms. SMITH. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

TRIBUTE TO ALANA PETERSEN

Ms. SMITH. Mr. President, I rise today to pay tribute and express my

gratitude to Alana Petersen, my deputy chief of staff and long time staff leader for the Minnesota congressional delegation. Alana is retiring from her official role after serving the Minnesota delegation since 1993.

During her public service, Alana worked for Congressman Dave Minge, from Minnesota's First Congressional District; Congressman John Oberstar, from Minnesota's Eighth Congressional District; Senator Al Franken; and now for me. In all of those roles, she has served the people of Minnesota first and especially those who most needed an ally and a voice in the halls of power here in Washington: farmers and rural families, new immigrants, Minnesota's Tribal communities, and Minnesota's diverse communities of color.

For those of you who don't know Alana, let me tell you a little bit about her. Alana was born in Minnesota and, like me, spent part of her childhood in New Mexico. In fact, she and I went to the same elementary school, although Alana is younger than me and had the benefit of a new building.

Alana headed Al Franken's Minnesota Senate office beginning when he was sworn in 2009. Before joining Franken's staff, she worked in the office of Congressman Jim Oberstar for 5 years as deputy district director, and she worked for Congressman Dave Minge for 6 years in several capacities.

Alana also served as executive director of Target Market, a statewide nonprofit organization that promoted an anti-tobacco message to teens, and she held a position at Grassroots Solutions, a political consulting firm where she worked with national labor unions, congressional candidates, and pro-choice organizations.

As if her official work weren't enough, Alana has long been a go-to volunteer for her community, where she has served as chair of the East Central Regional Arts Council and board chair for Women Winning, a bipartisan group dedicated to electing more women to public office.

Alana is married to Thom Petersen, who is the Minnesota commissioner of agriculture for Governor Tim Walz, and she is mom to Waylon and Dylan. Alana and her family live on a working farm in Pine County, MN, an hour north of the Twin Cities. The Petersens raise and show miniature horses at county fairs all across Minnesota and at the Minnesota State Fair, earning blue ribbons, not only because of the amazing minis but also thanks to the amazing costumes sewn by Alana.

To Thom, Waylon, and Dylan, thank you for sharing your mom and wife with us and with Minnesota all of these years.

So I can't tell you when I first met Alana, but we have been good friends and allies for decades. As in all great friendships born from working together, we are connected by a sense of shared purpose, a sense of humor, and a complete trust that, when in doubt, we can call the other one. Each of us, in

turn, has been a shoulder to lean on, a strategic adviser, a gut check, and a great excuse for a good laugh when either of us needs it.

This has been true for both of us for years, but never more so than in this last year when I became an accidental Senator and called on my old friend to jump in one more time to help me become a Senator and win a Senate seat, all in 10 months. Alana helped me to see that I could do this job and also win an election in such a short time. It is no exaggeration to say that I couldn't have done any of this without her.

Alana has the heart of an organizer. In fact, she tells the story that she first canvassed her neighborhood as a fifth-grader, knocking on doors for the father of a friend of hers who was running for office. She has been organizing and engaging people in the democratic process ever since.

As an organizer Alana knows that the best ideas come from the ground up, not the top down. She understands that the best work happens when you build relationships with people at the grassroots. She has mentored and taught generations of campaign and congressional office staffers that teamwork based on mutual respect, high expectations, and clear goals makes progress for people possible, and that it can be joyful work.

For years Alana has been the go-to person for young candidates just starting out—and a lot of us seasoned politicians too. The political offices, campaigns, and nonprofits of Minnesota are powered by the people Alana has taught and mentored.

As an organizer, she is rooted in the value that Paul Wellstone best expressed when he said that politics shouldn't be about money and power; it should be about improving people's lives.

It means more to me than I can express that Minnesotans elected me to serve in this seat once held by Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, and Paul Wellstone.

On October 25, 2002, we lost Paul in a terrible plane crash, along with Paul's wife Sheila, his daughter Marsha, and staffers Will, Tom, and Mary Mac, Alana's mentor. In the fall of 2002, Alana had quit her regular job in Duluth to join the campaign for Paul's reelection because she knew she wanted to contribute to the grassroots movement that Paul was building. The plane crash and the loss of our friends was heartbreaking to all of us.

Last year, on October 25, Alana shared a letter her father wrote to the Wellstone campaign team in the days after the crash. It is particularly touching because her father, Thomas Christiansen, passed away on October 25, 2009, 7 years after we lost Paul.

Here is part of what Alana's father said: "For some, public service is the dedication of one's life to the community. I have come to realize that my daughter Alana is one of those elite few."